

Living into Grace
A sermon preached by Jess Cook (via Facebook Live)
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
January 13, 2019
Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:26-39; Luke 3:15-22

“Remember your baptism.”

As I’ve been preparing today’s message, these three words have been running through my head on repeat.

“Remember your baptism. Remember your baptism.”

Though, as most of the folks who know me can attest, it’s a phrase that’s running through my mind most weeks, regardless of whether or not I’m planning to preach.

When David first contacted me about preaching today, I jumped at the opportunity, elated by the notion of preaching on Baptism of the Lord Sunday. I have to confess I’m a bit of a sacramental nerd, if such a thing exists, and have been known to ramble for, well, a long time, talking about how baptism and communion function not only as part of a congregation’s worship, but how they are made tangible in the day-to-day.

As acts initiated by Christ at key times in his life and ministry, our sacraments are intended to be relevant to us in our daily lives, to be tangible. With communion, the elements of bread and wine (or grape juice) are intended to be simple, and relevant to our context. While we talk about the body and blood of Christ, we are intended to connect that with our own bodies and blood, to see our place at that table with him 2000 years ago when, on the eve of his death, he gathered with his friends and vulnerably asked them to remember him. Jesus saw the writing on the walls - he knew what was coming and he knew his friends’ courage would fail them over the next few days. In breaking bread at that Last Supper, Jesus asked them to remember not only him, but to remember what his life was about - that he refused to give in to any system, religion or government that tried to draw lines around who was beloved by God. He did this in his body - his human body, and he called his disciples to do the same.

Jesus wasn’t naive about the difficulty of what he was asking - he knew challenging any structure was hard, and would cause suffering, or even death. Yet, it’s what the disciples were called to do 2000 years ago and what we are called to do as people of God today. So not only when we break bread in church on Sunday morning, but any time we share a meal, we are called to remember the things Jesus did in his life - in his flesh and blood, and to continue the work in our own bodies. Not only that, but we are reminded and encouraged to be doing it in a community that not only exists around whichever table we may be sitting, but across all space and time all the way back to that table at the Last Supper.

Baptism is a sacrament many of us in the Presbyterian Church experience as infants. Each time we baptize a new person into a community we promise to nurture and teach them in the faith. We baptize infants as a visible sign that God's grace is extended to us even when we do not have the ability to ask for it. Even when we do not have a concept of what grace is, it is extended to us. When we baptize new members in the community, we are often called to remember our baptism - to remember that grace is given to us freely.

Which, I don't know about y'all, if there's anything I'm prone to forget, it's that grace is extended to me. There is a quote often attributed to Martin Luther that each time we wash our face, we are called to remember our baptism. Each time it rains, remember your baptism. While washing your hands at the sink after a meal, remember your baptism.

Sacraments are intended to be relevant because their meaning can be easy to forget. The day after Jesus broke bread with his disciples and asked them to remember him, they forgot him. We are baptized as infants as a sign of abundant grace, yet we step away and forget that it's not offered to us, but to everyone. We forget what it means to be God's beloved children, and we forget that each of us is God's beloved child.

In today's texts Luke and Acts, we are given two stories of people living into their baptism.

The narrative of Jesus' baptism in Luke is unique among the four Gospels. The baptism itself is not described; it is only mentioned that Jesus is among all of the people; and, rather than the Spirit descending like a dove as Jesus ascends out of the water, in Luke's account, it is as Jesus prays that the heavens are opened, the Spirit comes down - in bodily form - like a dove, and God's voice booms from the skies - you are my beloved child; I delight in you. It is not the baptism that puts these events in motion, but prayer. Jesus is among all of the people - he is not set aside, he is not in a separate line among the clean, where the rest of the folks are in another line for the unclean. Jesus is baptized in solidarity among people filled with expectation and hope that can only be expressed by those who have known hopelessness, a longing that the person bearing the good news would lead them out of their current circumstances. And it is not this act alone that leads to the heavens opening up, but prayer. Our baptism is an initiating act that is lived out in the practice of our lives.

In Luke, as in Mark, God's voice addresses Jesus directly: "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." His affirmation as God's beloved child comes just prior to the lengthy account of his human ancestry. Before he belongs to his human family, he belongs to God.

In Acts, we are told the story of the Ethiopian eunuch - a character celebrated as the first foreign convert to Christianity, whose archetype has a colorful history throughout the canon. As a eunuch, Levitical law asserted his prohibition from the Assembly of God. Foreigners whose practices were seen as a draw away from worship of God and into idol worship, were also prohibited from the Assembly. Yet, Isaiah 56 specifically includes both eunuchs and foreigners, stating: "Do not let foreigner joined to God say, 'God will surely separate me from God's people;' and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree' ..." for God says, "[I will] make them

joyful in my house of prayer. . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people. Thus says God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, "I will gather others to them besides those already gathered." (Isaiah 56: 3-5,8)

Philip is told by an angel of God to go to a wilderness road, and it is there that he meets the eunuch. A person with a great deal of power, the eunuch is a court official for the queen of Ethiopia, and is in charge of her entire treasury. Even more, he is reading Isaiah when he and Philip cross paths. Philip again follows instructions from the Spirit and excitedly runs to the eunuch and, surely in astonishment, finds the eunuch on the chariot, reading Philip's own sacred text. "Do you understand what you're reading?" He asks. "How can I," responds the eunuch, "unless someone guides me?" The two then talk through the text and Philip begins telling the eunuch the good news of Jesus and when they come upon the very next body of water, the eunuch commands the chariot to stop and excitedly points it out. "Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The two go down to the water and Philip baptizes the eunuch right there. Philip is then whisked away by the Spirit and the eunuch, we are told, goes on his way rejoicing.

For a long time, when I read this story, I read the tone of the eunuch as meek, asking permission to be baptized. Now, though, I read it in a different way. Like so many folks who've been told they only occupy a marginal space within a tradition, the eunuch has a unique perspective on the text, and on the tradition. Where I still believe there is a deep respect in his exchange with Philip, when I now read the question - "what is to keep me from being baptized?" I do so with a certain solidarity that has come from years of education, prayer, and study. The eunuch is like so many who've been told they do not belong among the people of God, only to have studied and learned and felt God's presence in their lives in a much more acute way than those who are sometimes so wed to their traditions that they forget what it is to be a child of God. When posing the question to Philip, the eunuch knows down to his bones that there is nothing to keep him from being baptized. It has been my experience that so often those of us who've been told we are unworthy of grace are the ones who feel it the most. The eunuch knows that, before anything else, he is God's beloved child. And that understanding empowers him to boldly claim his baptism and his place among God's people.

In today's passage from Luke, we see Jesus claimed as God's beloved child. In the text from Isaiah, we are told that amidst the turmoils of the world, not only does God hold and protect us, but God has called us by name. Having that kind of affirmation - of being called and named from a parent of community has a big impact on who we are and how we live in the world.

Prior to coming on board with More Light in the fall of 2017, I was the Youth Programs Director for a *non-profit in Richmond working with LGBTQIA+ youth*. We had several support groups throughout the week, one specifically for trans-identified youth. Time and again, I'd meet youth who came into the center almost paralyzed with fear. Many sat down in group and during check in, when we always stated our name and pronouns, they would freeze, or ask permission to be

called by their name and addressed with the correct pronouns. Etched on my memory is the shift that happens in a person's face when they begin to feel seen. I saw it again and again as the shell of a human that often came through the doors for the first time became a full version of the person they were created to be. I saw them come to life, step into who they could become, and carry that transformation out into the world. I also saw the frustration and struggle as many of them stepped out at the end of group each week, only to go home to families or schools that either refused to use the correct name or just didn't make it a priority. On the bi-annual surveys we administered to all our youth, we often found that 70% of the youth we worked with had seriously contemplated suicide in the six months prior. 70%.

The joy that came with naming and claiming who they were was met with a world that still refused to acknowledge that. And that joy deflated them like air hissing out of a balloon. A *recent study published by the Journal of Adolescent Health* found that simply using a transgender person's chosen name can reduce their risk of suicide by 65%. 65%! By simply using their name. Over time, when I saw the families of these youth connect with the support they needed, when they had knowledgeable healthcare providers and a good therapist, I saw the youth who had been shells of themselves come alive. Many of whom have taken that experience and are now working to create very real change in the world in a whole range of ways. They were seen and affirmed in the fullness of their identities and they knew they no longer needed to ask permission to be themselves. They could claim it with the certainty of being called God's beloved. I have said on a number of occasions that I don't really know what happened with regard to Jesus's body on that Easter Sunday, but I have seen enough people come back to life to believe in resurrection.

I recently received a text from one of More Light's board members who does campus ministry and works at a church in the same town. She's been intentional about connecting with the LGBTQIA+ folks and has been a steady and consistent ally, creating spaces in church for many who've been told they have no place. Her text was from one of these folks who found a home in her congregation. The church has a tradition of asking people to write expressions of gratitude on cards around Thanksgiving, which then get formed into a litany of Thanksgiving that is read by the youth at an annual dinner at the beginning of a new year. Among the expressions of gratitude was a note from a trans person who'd been attending for a while. "I am so grateful to this congregation," she said, "for helping make my gender transition so joyful."

Now, I've been present with a lot of people going through various parts of a gender transition and I can say with a fair amount of certainty that I have never heard anyone classify their experience as joyful. It still makes me pause just thinking about it. Joyful.

When we baptize people in the church, we promise to love and nurture them in the faith, to embrace them as part of the community and to walk with them through the journey of their lives. And those promises are not conditional. That grace that is promised in baptism is our birthright - all of us, and it is often the ones who have been told they do not deserve it who show us most clearly how to live into the abundance that comes with knowing down to your bones that you are beloved.

We have been given this charge of living into being God's beloved children and family. Part of that is accepting the grace that is offered to us, and honestly seeing the things that prevent us from doing so. That means bearing with one another, breaking bread together, moving through the ebb and flow of life, whatever it may bring. It means resisting any system that tries to enforce the idea that some of us are more or less worthy of a home or job or safety, of a living wage for our work, of being called by our name or pronouns. This charge to grace requires that we do the work of unlearning the toxic narratives that keep us blind to the ways in which we, too, are God's beloved so we may be able to fully see it both in ourselves and one another. It isn't easy, and it's pretty messy, in my experience, because it requires us to lean in ways we are often taught not to lean. It requires self-examination among community in a world that only values individualism, it requires us to honestly examine how we spend our money and our time. The call to live into being God's beloved is a long a messy journey, but I believe it begins with the acknowledgement that we are all God's beloved children and that God has called each of us by name, even if it isn't the name we were given at birth. You are God's beloved child. I am God's beloved child. And we have been given the wonderful and powerful gift of grace. May we live individually and together as if we truly believe that to be so.